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SPECIAL REPORT

'You Can Run But You Can't Hide'

The terrorists who hijacked the Achille Lauro fall into an audacious airborne trap.

The mood in the White House basement at 8 o'clock Thursday morning was despondent. The Reagan administration's counterterrorist team ended its first meeting of the day. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak passed the word to U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Veliotis and repeated it publicly: the hijackers of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro had left Egypt. The deal, Mubarak said, was struck with the PLO before the murder of Leon Klinghoffer had come to light. The news appeared to dash the Reagan administration's hope of catching the terrorists. Veliotis had attempted to deliver a cable from the president himself to Mubarak, and Secretary of State George Shultz had tried to telephone the Egyptian president. Mubarak deflected all contact with the Americans to his foreign minister, Esmat Abdel Meguid, and to Defense Minister Abdel Halim Abu Ghazala. As the meeting broke up, one discouraged team member turned to the group's chairman, National Security Council Deputy Staff Director John Poindexter. "It looks like it's all over," Poindexter said.

The American intelligence community, which had kept a close eye on Egypt and the southeastern Mediterranean for signs of the hijackers, lowered the priority of its operations in the area: raw intelligence no longer was being processed immediately, analyzed and fed to top policymakers. Some of the Navy's elite SEAL Team Six were back in Gibraltar, en route home from another fruitless and frustrating wait at the American base at Sigonella, Sicily. But before they threw in the towel, U.S. officials decided to make one more pass at their sources—and just before 8:30 that morning, there was startling news.

One source produced convincing evidence that Mubarak was lying, that the terrorists were still in Egypt and that they probably would try to leave by air. Armed with this information, the NSC's terrorism expert, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, a veteran of countless covert operations and the Reagan administration's controversial liaison to the Nicaraguan contras, went to Poindexter and said, "Maybe they really are still there."

On that hope, the U.S. intelligence com-

munity plunged back to work trying to confirm the report. Charles Allen, the CIA's national intelligence officer for counterterrorism, ordered the flow of information turned up again. Within an hour Allen reported back that evidence suggested that the four hijackers were still in Egypt and that neither Egypt nor the PLO had figured out what to do with them.

Back at the White House, North had an idea. "Do you remember Yamamoto?" he asked Poindexter, referring to the Japanese admiral whose military transport was inter-

cepted and shot down by American P-38 fighters in the South Pacific during World War II. "God, we can't shoot them down," replied Poindexter. "No, but we have two choices," said North. "Our friends could shoot them down or we can force them down somewhere."

"Where?" Poindexter asked. "Sigonella," replied North. With Poindexter's blessing, North called Vice Adm. Arthur Moreau, the Joint Chiefs of Staff representative on the counterterrorism task force, and told him his idea. Moreau said he would look



F-14 Tomcats on the flight deck of the USS Saratoga: A Navy posse took to the skies

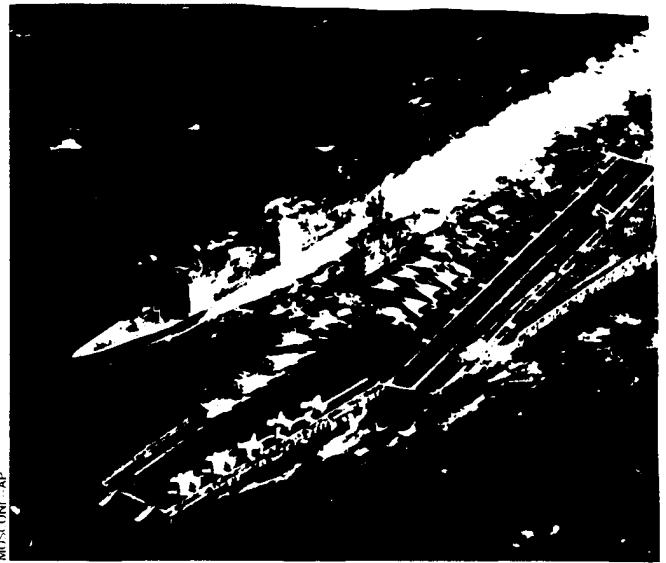
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into it, and within 10 minutes he was back on the line. The Sixth Fleet, he said, could do the job. North, Moreau and a team of Pentagon officers went to work, outlining a plan to intercept the terrorists if they tried to leave Egypt by air. The administration had never written a contingency plan for snatching a civilian jet from the air. "This was somewhat more improvisational than usual," said one insider. "It was just creative thinking."

Other officials grilled the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency on how sure they were of the intelligence they were feeding in a steady stream to the White House Situation Room. At the State Department, Under Secretary for Political Affairs Michael Armacost, aided by Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Arnold Raphel, analyzed the political pros and cons of such a daring move. By late morning, Adm. William J. Crowe, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was ready to telephone Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger with the group's preliminary evaluation. "Our boys are good," he reported. "I think they can do it. I think we should let them try."

By 11 o'clock U.S. sources had con-

firmed that the terrorists were still trying to get out of Egypt. Intelligence sources had located the plane the terrorists planned to use for their getaway: an EgyptAir Boeing 737 jetliner, drawn up on the runway at Al Maza Air Base northeast of Cairo. The spotters reported its identification number and the name of its pilot to Washington. There were signs that the terrorists meant to fly to Tunis. North presented his plan for intercepting them to Poindexter. It called for the launching of the aircraft carrier Saratoga's F-14 jets and radar planes to surprise the terrorists over the Mediterranean, calling the SEAL's back from Gibraltar to Sigonella and forcing the Egyptian plane to land in Sicily.



The Saratoga on station: Ready and waiting

At about 11:30 North sent the design to national-security adviser Robert McFarlane, who was traveling aboard Air Force One to Chicago with President Reagan. North used a secure data communications link (not a phone). The president and White House chief of staff Don Regan had just finished lunch at the Kitchens of Sara Lee outside Chicago. Although McFarlane provided only the broadest outline, Reagan agreed to the idea in principle. The president insisted, however, that he wanted to know more about the risk of casualties before giving his final approval.

McFarlane called Poindexter back and said the president had approved the plan but wanted to see the specifics, including the exact rules of engagement that would govern the U.S. pilots, before he gave the go-ahead. With that, Pentagon planners set to work writing the actual plan for the operation. North and Moreau went over the proposed rules of engagement on a secure telephone line, even after the operation. U.S. officials refused to disclose what they were.

There were a few doubts about the wisdom of the plan. At first some State Department officials worried about the effect the operation—if successful—would have on Mubarak, walking a tightrope between moderation and a rising tide of Arab radicalism; on U.S. relations with Egypt, and on America's standing in the Arab world. Weinberger, off on a trip to Ottawa and to his summer home in Bar Harbor, Maine, was even more skittish, as was the Defense Department's representative on the counter-terrorist task force, Deputy Secretary William H. Taft IV. Weinberger called the president repeatedly to express his reservations about the plan, at one point telling Reagan: "This will destroy our relations with Egypt."

In the end, the State Department argued



acking the hijackers as they left Cairo and bringing them to heel

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McFarlane (left) and Reagan with the president: Weighing the risks before ordering the attack

that the risks of hijacking the hijackers were far outweighed by the benefits—especially since the operation would relieve Mubarak of the onus of turning the Arab terrorists over to the West. Nearly all the U.S. planners agreed that if the mission were approved by the president, it would have to be kept under the tightest wraps. The security was so intense that the United States did not alert Italy.

The president ordered Weinberger to proceed, risking a major security breach in the process. Ironically, while U.S. intelligence was closely monitoring communications from Egypt, the scrambler aboard Air Force One was broken, and Reagan was forced to make his call "in the clear." As a result the conversation with Weinberger was overheard by a ham radio operator who reported that the defense secretary expressed reservations about an operation that might require Navy pilots to fire across the nose of an unarmed civilian plane. Brushing those objections aside, Reagan insisted that the mission be carried out, so long as no innocent lives were put at risk.

About 2 o'clock, or less than two hours after the president had given the green light, the plan had come together. The word was flashed to the Saratoga and the first planes—E-2C Hawkeye radar aircraft, a flight of four F-14 fighters and the Navy's EA-6B Prowler electronic warfare plane—took off and headed south to wait. But the rules of engagement had not finally been settled, and the first

flight of F-14s returned to the carrier.

Shortly after 3 p.m., intelligence sources received word that 10 minutes earlier the terrorists had arrived at Al Maza Air Base. Thoughtfully, the sources also produced the terrorists' flight number. Aboard Air Force One, the president snapped, "Let's do it." At 4:13 word came that the EgyptAir plane had filed a flight plan for Algiers and taken off. Orders were instantly flashed to the Saratoga to launch its F-14s again. The chase was on.

The F-14s and their support planes, including the Hawkeyes and the Prowler electronic-warfare plane, headed to their station south of Crete and set up an airborne gate, surveying every plane headed out of Egypt until they found the EgyptAir flight they were looking for. Meanwhile, the United States set to work trying to make sure the terrorists had no place to go except into the arms of the law. President Reagan

fired off a flash cable to Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, telling him the United States had reason to believe—despite the terrorists' flight plan—that the hijackers of the Achille Lauro were aboard an EgyptAir plane headed for Tunis. The United States, Reagan said, believed the terrorists should not be allowed to land. According to one knowledgeable source, some American officials also were worried that the terrorists might try to head for Athens or Beirut; cables were sent to Greece and Lebanon after the EgyptAir flight took off, asking the governments there not to let the hijackers land.

Some 45 minutes after the EgyptAir flight took off into the darkness, it flew into the Americans' gate, 80 miles south of Crete. The Egyptian plane was right on course, flying at 34,000 feet and a speed of 400 knots. Initially the F-14s loitered behind the 737, flying without lights and with darkened cockpits. There is no evidence that anyone aboard the

Egyptian jet was aware of their presence as they trailed their prey to the ambush point. Then the Americans turned on their lights and closed in alongside both wings of the airliner. "I imagine the plane informed the Egyptians when they were intercepted," Weinberger said later. But there was no evidence that the pilot had been ordered to return home.

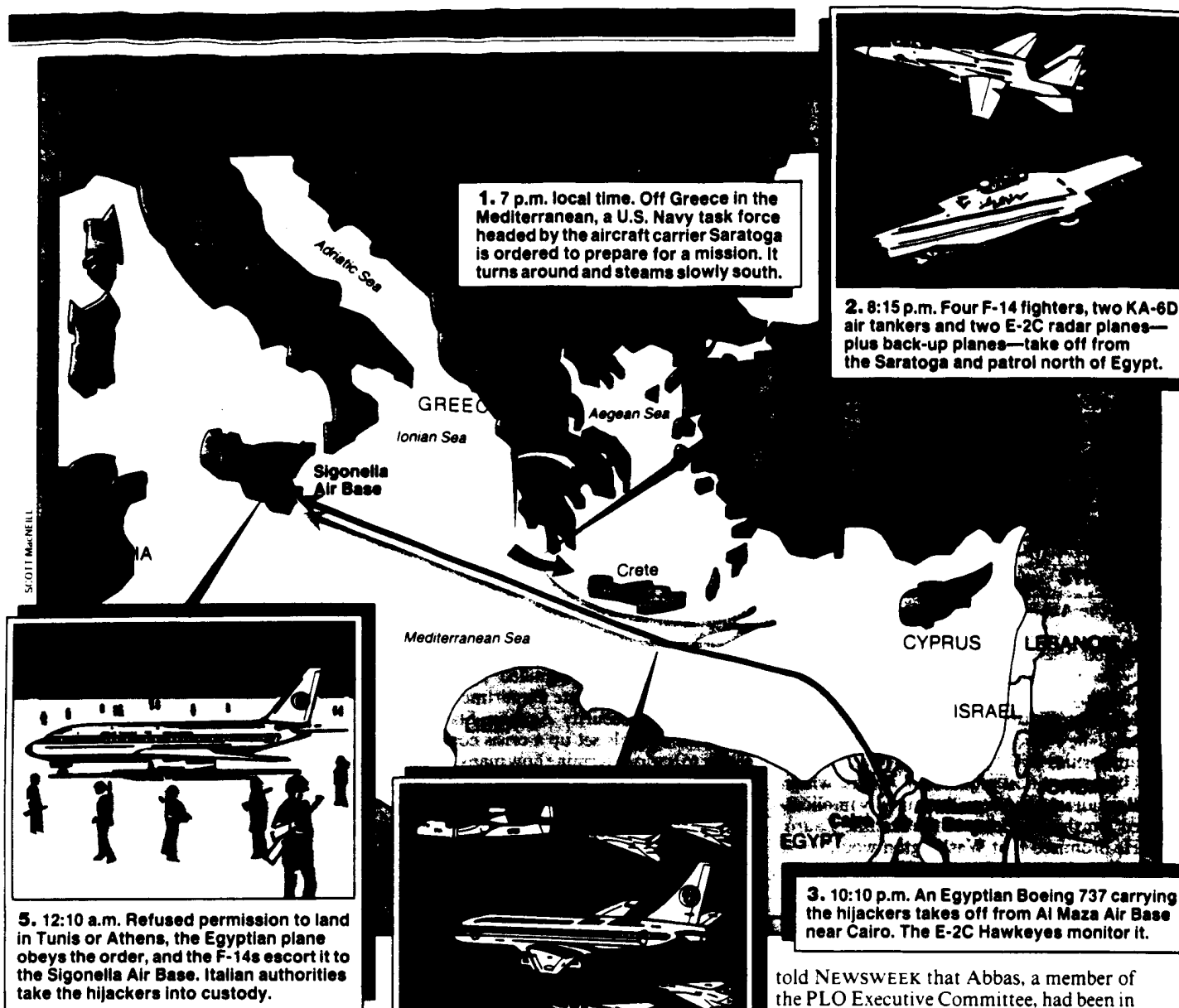
The Egyptian pilot began desperately radioing Cairo for instructions. He tried one frequency after another, but he could not get through and he could hear only garbled sounds in his headset. The EA-6B was jamming him, jumping up and down the radio scale right along with him. Finally, reported Weinberger, the pilot "accepted the inevitable" and radioed that he would follow the American orders. The EgyptAir plane fell into place and reluctantly followed the pack of American warplanes to Sicily.

There was almost no chance the 737 would have been shot down. From the outset the president had insisted that no innocent lives were to be lost, and U.S. intelligence knew that the plane was being flown by Egyptians who had no involvement in the hijacking. Although the fighters had been authorized to fire missiles in front of the aircraft's nose, just the intimidating presence of the jets did the trick. Aboard the plane a swaggering crew of terrorists suddenly turned into cornered airborne rats. "I don't know if you ever saw a Tomcat with all its lights on going like hell," said a crewman from the Saratoga later. "It's an awesome



Veliotis (left) and Mubarak: Ambiguity about Egypt's role

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sight. I guess we just scared them down."

Only when the little procession was about to enter Italian airspace did the United States inform the Italian government of its plans. To have done so earlier, although it would have been a little more diplomatic, would have risked leaks that could have killed the plan, one official said. But the Italians were less than delighted at the news. "They went crazy," says one American official. In fact, Italian ground controllers refused to grant the 737 permission to enter their airspace and the Egyptian pilot had to declare an in-flight emergency, saying he was low on fuel, in order to get clearance to land at Sigonella. When he got there, the terrorists found the commandos of SEAL Team Six, who had returned to Sicily from Gibraltar, waiting with the Italian carabinieri.

There was a debate over which force—the American or Italian—had jurisdiction. Secretary of State Shultz, in a long tele-

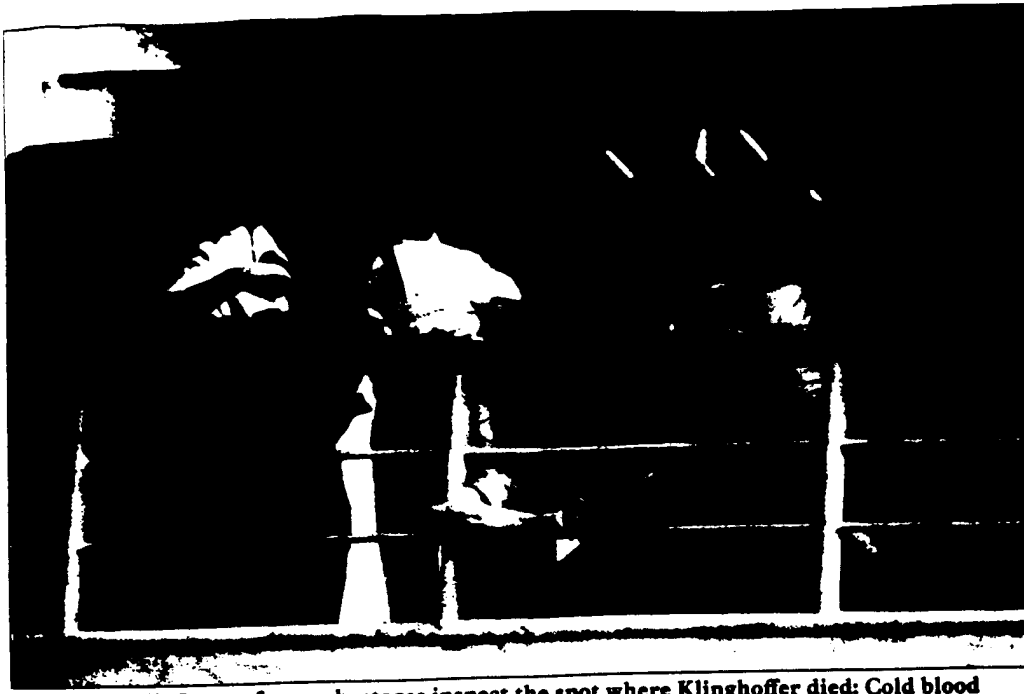
phone conversation with Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti, yielded when Andreotti assured him the pirates would promptly be charged with murder. "We really wanted them to come home with us, but nobody is unhappy with this," said one U.S. official.

When they boarded the 737, U.S. and Italian officials found a bonus: not only had they captured the four hijackers who would be accused of seizing the Achille Lauro and murdering Leon Klinghoffer, but they found Abul Abbas, a high-ranking aide to Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasir Arafat. Intelligence sources believe Abbas directed the hijacking. Sources

told NEWSWEEK that Abbas, a member of the PLO Executive Committee, had been in constant radio contact with the hijackers from his base in Beirut, beginning immediately after they seized the cruise ship. After the hijackers announced that they had killed one of their American hostages, the sources said, Abbas radioed them and berated them for botching their mission, which was to infiltrate Israel to carry out a terrorist operation at a military target near the port city of Ashdod. Late Friday night Abbas and an aide also on the plane were flown to Rome aboard the EgyptAir jetliner by Italian authorities.

On Saturday afternoon came the only discouraging news since the operation was launched. The United States had started extradition proceedings against Abbas but the Italians rebuffed the effort, despite a new legal-assistance treaty between the two countries. The issue was a delicate one. The Italians depend heavily on the Middle East for oil. They have close relations with the Arab world and with the PLO. And at least until recently, they have had less

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On the Achille Lauro, former hostages inspect the spot where Klinghoffer died: Cold blood

headquarters in Tunis, sharp enough to put a strain on relations between Jerusalem and Rome. And as the Achille Lauro plowed up and down the eastern Mediterranean, the pirates seemed a good deal more interested in getting away than in pressing their original demands.

The administration concluded that Italy and Egypt should take the lead in handling the deteriorating situation. Besides having relatively good relations with the Palestinians, Italy had a proven counterterrorist unit of at least 300 men. Among other tasks, it had rescued U.S. Brig. Gen. James Dozier from the Red Brigades. To isolate the pirates, Washington persuaded governments in the eastern Mediterranean not to allow the hijacked cruise ship to dock. The State Department also sought to rally other governments to the notion that there

trouble than others from Arab terrorism.

On Saturday President Reagan sent a strongly worded letter to Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi in which Reagan said he was "surprised" that Italian authorities had "summarily rejected" the U.S. extradition request for Abbas, whom Reagan said had been "criminally implicated" in the hijacking of the Achille Lauro. He promised that Washington would soon deliver "overwhelming evidence" of Abbas's guilt. The mutual-assistance treaty, Reagan argued, requires the Italians to arrest Abbas and to give the United States 45 days to make its case against him. But U.S. intelligence sources reported that while American officials were trying to serve a warrant on Abbas, he apparently slipped out of Italy, dressed in an EgyptAir uniform. Leaving Rome's Fiumicino Airport on a chartered Yugoslav plane, he headed for Yugoslavia, apparently with the connivance of Italian, Egyptian and Yugoslav authorities. If the Italians collaborated in Abbas's release, they may come to regret it. "Abul Abbas has a long history of taking hostages in order to win the release of people of his who are in jail," said one U.S. official. "Now that this has happened, I'm glad the Italians are holding the terrorists, not us."

That the terrorists would ever see the inside of a jail did not seem possible in the first hours of the hijacking of the Achille Lauro. The four terrorists who seized the ship demanded that Israel release 50 Palestinian prisoners, including at least one convicted murderer; they threatened to kill the passengers they had taken captive if they didn't get their way. In the United States, the government's special worldwide

antiterrorist computer network, code-named Flashboard, signaled the White House, Pentagon, State Department, CIA and National Security Agency. State Department officials set up a crisis command center to try to determine how many Americans were on the ship. They converted the emergency telephone lines that had just been used for the Mexican earthquake to handle calls from worried relatives.

Not until early Tuesday afternoon, when Syrian authorities were turning the ship away from the port of Tartus, did the full gravity of the hijacking become clear. Using highly classified eavesdropping methods, an American RC-135 spy plane learned that one of the terrorists had killed Leon Klinghoffer, 69, a New Yorker who was confined to a wheelchair. The ship's radio transmitted a grisly boast to the shore. "We threw the first body into the water after shooting him in the head," one of the pirates said. "Minutes from now we will follow up with the second one. Do not worry, Tartus, we have a lot of them here."

The four terrorists seemed more mysterious than most. It was difficult to establish who they were and what they were really after. Their target—an Italian ship—was puzzling. Italy had issued one of the sharpest criticisms of Israel's attack against PLO

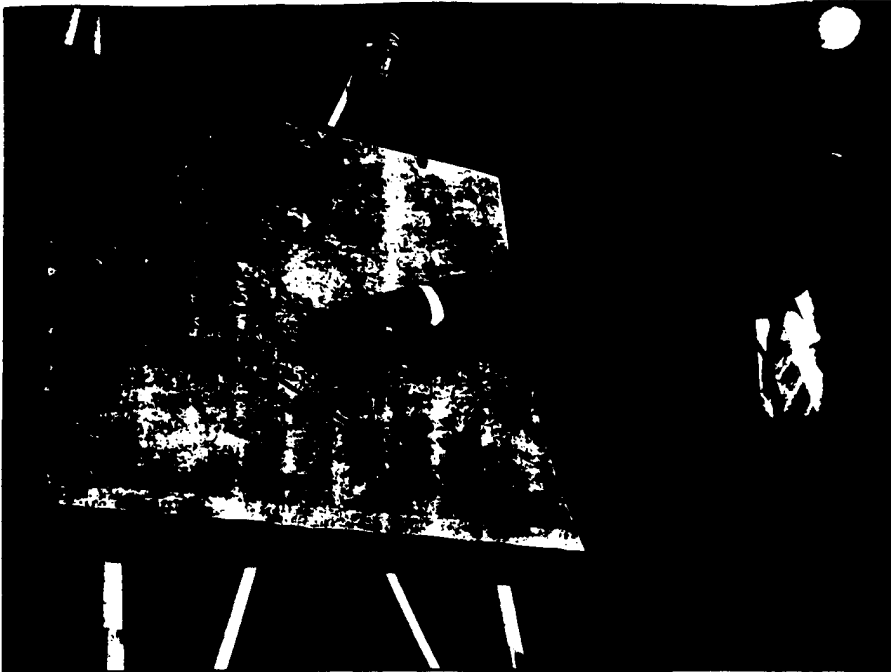
should be no knuckling under to terrorism and that the Israelis should hang on to their prisoners.

The administration succeeded in keeping anyone from offering the terrorists refuge, and its diplomacy ultimately led to the release of the hostages. But it did not produce the terrorists. The main problem was Mubarak, who had to secure the release of the hostages while protecting himself against the certain fury of Arab fanatics who considered the terrorists heroes. The Americans and Israelis objected violently to the man Mubarak selected as his intermediary to the terrorists: Abbas, leader of the same Palestinian splinter group to which the hijackers claimed to belong. Abbas arrived in Egypt Wednesday morning and quickly

got in touch by radio with the hijackers aboard the Achille Lauro that was then anchored off Port Said. The terrorists greeted him enthusiastically. Giving orders rather than negotiating, Abbas instructed the pirates to await a boat bearing a Palestinian "with a distinguishing mark" and to accompany the man to the shore. His order was followed, and the Achille Lauro was free. While the U.S. government could not quarrel with that result, it could certainly dispute the means. The available evidence indicated that Abbas had ordered the terrorists



De Rosa: Unanswered questions



Weinberger shows how it was done: The defense secretary worried about Arab reaction

on board the ship in the first place.

Mubarak and Foreign Minister Meguid argued that when they agreed to grant the terrorists safe conduct out of Egypt they were convinced that none of the Achille Lauro captives had been injured. Although the terrorists had been overheard gloating about the murder of Klinghoffer, Meguid claimed to be convinced when the ship's still captive skipper reported "Everybody is OK." The Egyptians had plenty of opportunity to learn the truth after the pirates had left the ship. But when security officials boarded the Achille Lauro at Port Said, they claimed that they were too busy looking for bombs to ask whether anyone had been killed.

Meguid said that he had learned of the murder only after he had been phoned by Italian Prime Minister Craxi, three hours after the ship had been released. By that time, Meguid said, it was too late to act upon the information: the terrorists were already out of the country. The following day Mubarak chose to blame the lapse on the Achille Lauro's skipper. "If the captain had told us that a passenger had been killed," he said, "we would have changed our position toward the whole operation." He added that the terrorists had been whisked out of the country to preserve Egypt's credibility. "We took it upon ourselves to get them out of here so that people would believe us afterwards should there be a similar operation." That, of course, was an outright lie.

Ironically, the haggling over the terrorists gave American intelligence operatives more time to discover where they were. Among other things, the operatives moni-

tored a running debate between Egyptian and Palestinian officials over how to dispose of the hijackers. Mubarak was willing to let them go, provided that Arafat could find a country willing to accept them. From those overheard conversations, U.S. officials ultimately were able to pinpoint the location of the terrorists and to predict their movements.

Meguid had agreed that the hijackers would be given safe passage out of the country. The decision enraged U.S. Ambassador Veliotis, who on an open radio transmission from the Achille Lauro instructed a subordinate to "tell the foreign minister that we demand that they prosecute these sons of bitches." Instead, Meguid announced that the terrorists had been permitted to flee Egypt.

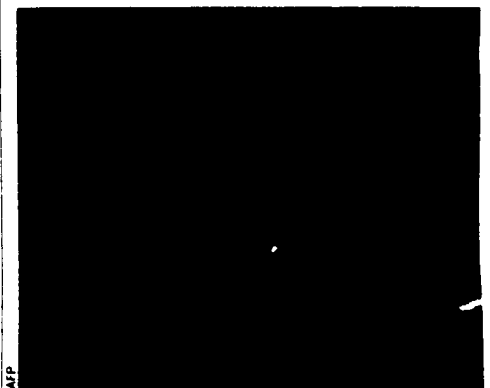
U.S. intelligence agencies keeping watch on the Tunisian coast reported that despite the Egyptian claims, the terrorists had not turned up at the PLO's refuge. The American fury at Mubarak grew. His aides argued with Veliotis that a small country like Egypt should not be forced to go out on a limb to fight terrorism when the major powers had refused to confront the problem. "The Egyptians were no help at all," said one senior U.S. official.

Convinced that the terrorists were still in Egyptian jurisdiction, Veliotis declared: "These are murderers, and there should be an investigation and they should be prosecuted according to the laws of Egypt like any other criminals." According to informed sources, the terrorists were seen with Abbas in Cairo's Sheraton Heliopolis Hotel many hours after they were said to have fled. The transparent conclusion was that even after the murder was established,

the Egyptians meant to sneak the terrorists out of the country in the company of the very man who may have ordered their piratical act.

Feelings became harder when the Egyptians detained the ship even as they appeared to be letting the terrorists escape. But all along there was enough ambiguity to Cairo's moves to convince some that Mubarak did not mean for the terrorists to get off scot free. According to a well-placed congressional source, officials of the Egyptian intelligence service quietly passed on precise information about the EgyptAir flight. Others including Reagan said the United States had acted alone.

Earlier, New York Republican Sen. Alfonse D'Amato expressed the view of many of his congressional colleagues when he called for taking a harder look at Egypt's more than \$2 billion a year in U.S. military and economic aid. But such talk was considerably muted once it was learned that Egypt may have supplied Washington with covert intelligence. According to one Senate source, it's easy to understand why Mubarak acted as he did: he clearly understood the risk to Egypt's relations with the United States. Egypt is second only to Israel in the amount of U.S. foreign aid it receives. But he was also aware of the danger he faced from Egyptian and other Arab radicals. The Egyptians remember all too well what happened to the late Anwar Sadat. Now, however, Mubarak can claim he never gave in to American pressure and still maintain correct relations with Washington.



Abul Abbas: The hijackers were his men

The success of the ambush helped ease earlier frictions. And the administration clearly had no intention of breaking with a vital strategic partner. "As of this morning," said a congressional source after the interception, "you're not going to find any American official attacking Egypt in public the way they did yesterday." How much sportsmanship Egypt would show remained an open question. Initially at least, Mubarak accused the United States of piracy in seizing the Egyptian air-

liner. And Cairo rumbled with anti-American bitterness.

At one point NEWSWEEK's Rod Nordland was surrounded by a crowd of angry students. "Are you American?" they shouted, pressing in close, shaking their fists, pulling at his clothes and tearing pages from his notebook. "I thought it wise to lie," he reported. "I'm French," he said, and the mood immediately cooled. Then other voices shouted, "He looks like an American," and "He's probably an Israeli spy."

"You'd better get out of here fast," counseled the single sympathetic voice in the mob. Suddenly, however, a triple line of police began to charge. To Nordland's relief, the anti-American mob broke up and fled. An armored car charged through the scattering ranks firing dozens of tear-gas canisters into the crowd. One student ran up to him and shook a hot canister in his face. "See what your country is doing to us," he said, pointing to the inscription that read "Made in U.S.A."

With feelings souring, the released American hostages flew from Cairo to Sicily on a U.S. military jet. At the Italian section of the Sigonella Air Base, the four hijackers were mustered for a lineup. Four of the passengers were led in separately to identify them. "There was positive, unequivocal identification," said Frank Hodes, one of the released Americans. "I saw them as they came out [of the lineup]," said his wife, Mildred. "And there was no doubt that it was the same men." The former hostages, added Hodes, "were elated, euphoric that they had the guys who created this world incident and caused the death of a very dear friend of ours."

Back home the sense of jubilation was also stronger than anxiety over what might happen next in the ongoing war against terrorism. "Thank God," exclaimed New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "We've finally won one." Ronald Reagan placed a phone call to Marilyn Klinghoffer, the widow of Achille Lauro's helpless, innocent martyr. According to her son-in-law, she thanked the president for his condolences, saying: "I just want you to know how much the terrorists hate you." "I appreciate that," Reagan responded, "but I hope they'll have more reason to hate me in the future as we continue to try to stop these people from committing these terrible acts." "These people don't deserve to live," said Mrs. Klinghoffer with rising bitterness. "They are despicable! Late last night in Italy I had the opportunity to face every one of them. I spat in their faces and I told them what I thought of them."

"You did?" exclaimed the president. "God bless you."

JOHN WALCOTT with ROD NORDLAND in Cairo.
THEODORE STANGER in Rome. MILAN J. KUBIC
in Jerusalem. ANDREW NAGORSKI in Bonn.
JOHN BARRY in Washington and
SUSAN AGREST in New York